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Richard Frank. *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, Volume I: July 1937-May 1942*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, www.penguinrandomhouse.ca, 2020. 836 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, maps, index. CDN \$54.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-324-00210-9. (E-book available.)

Richard Frank is well known to students of the Second World War. An attorney by trade, he made his name as a historian of the conflict in 1990, with the publication of his first book on the battle of Guadalcanal, which, three decades later, remains the definitive history of its subject. He followed that up with *Downfall*, which examined the denouement of the U.S. war against Japan. Now Frank has embarked upon an even more formidable project: a three-volume history of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific that Frank claims is the first work in any language “that takes as its fundamental perspective on World War II the whole canvas of Asia and the Pacific Region.” (7) This claim ignores Peter Harmsen’s own ongoing trilogy about the wars during that period: *Storm Clouds over the Pacific* (Casemate, 2018) and *Japan Runs Wild* (Casemate 2020). Given the longstanding tendency of historians to survey the war from the perspective of Japan’s opponents, Frank’s approach is nonetheless welcome. For while the Chinese, the Americans, the British, and the Soviets might have viewed their war against Japan primarily from their own perspective, for the Japanese, these were all various fronts in a single conflict that stretched from 1937 until their surrender in 1945.

Frank emphasizes this point by noting how events occurring in var-

ious regions played a role in shaping Japanese policymaking. This emerges early on in the book with chapters on the early stages of Japan’s war against China. What began as a minor incident at the Marco Polo (Lugouqiao) Bridge on the night of 7-8 July, quickly escalated thanks to the aggressive response of Japanese commanders in the region, who anticipated a quick victory instead of the quagmire that followed. Frank gives considerable credit here to the Nationalist Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-shek, who despite the varying quality of his forces, and the fractured political situation in his country, nonetheless committed his best units to slow the Japanese advance, giving the Chinese time to withdraw and regroup. As a result, Japan found itself in a war that made an unsustainable demand on her resources and lacked a clear path to achieving victory.

For many in Japan’s military hierarchy, the war was especially worrisome because it distracted people from the country that many in the Imperial Army saw as their primary foe: the Soviet Union. This was soon underscored by a brief border war in 1938-9 that ended in an embarrassing defeat for the Japanese. Yet Germany’s victories in Western Europe in the spring of 1940 opened up a tantalizing opportunity for Japan to seize strategically valuable British, French, and Dutch colonial possessions in the Far East. Frank places particular weight on the Tripartite Pact, which, while giving Japan new allies at a point when their victory seemed certain, also “served even more to acquire vehement enemies” by turning Japan’s ongoing war with China into part of a larger global conflict. It also contrib-

uted to their inability to come to terms with the United States, which in 1941 began supplying Chiang's Nationalists with Lend-Lease aid while embargoing oil exports to Japan. Though the Japanese government wanted to reach a settlement with the Roosevelt administration, neither side could accept the other's terms to begin negotiations. For the Japanese, this made war the more acceptable alternative, even if the odds of victory were long.

Roughly half of Frank's book is devoted to the period between the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the fall of the American outpost on Corregidor five months later. These were the months when Japanese forces dominated the western Pacific and Southeast Asia, sweeping all before them. Frank details all of the major land and naval battles, including the sinking of the HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the Battle of the Java Sea, and the Imperial Japanese Navy's raid into the Indian Ocean. In the process, he debunks many longstanding misconceptions about the war, including the speculation that the Japanese could have destroyed the oil farms and repair facilities at Pearl Harbor in a third wave of attacks. Frank dismisses this argument by pointing out that the time it would have taken to prepare and launch such an attack would have meant that the returning strike force could not have made it back to their carriers before nightfall.

Such sound analysis is just one hallmark of Frank's fine study. Though limited to English-language sources and translated works, he has mined archival resources on three continents and benefited greatly from recent studies on the war in China and India. Taking these materials together, he has brought about a long-overdue corrective to the more limited approaches adopted in previous accounts of the Second World War in

the region. The result is revisionist history of the highest order, one that hopefully will alter how students of the era interpret the conflict. If the later volumes measure up to the standard set by this one, the series will likely serve as essential reading on the Second World War for decades to come. Hopefully, we will not have to wait long for Frank to follow through on the promise of this truly excellent book.

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Hal M. Friedman. *Blue versus Purple. The U.S. Naval War College, the Soviet Union, and the New Enemy in the Pacific, 1946*. Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, [www.navalwarcollegepress.com](http://www.navalwarcollegepress.com), 2017. xxxvi+442 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. US \$35.00, paper; ISBN 978-1-935352-31-0.

Bottom Line up Front: I recently read Norman Friedman's excellent book, *Winning a Future War: War Gaming and Victory in the Pacific War*. In that book he clearly explains the war-gaming at the US Naval War College, in the period 1920-1940, and its impact on US Navy force design and strategic planning to counter a war with Japan. I was expecting that Hal Friedman's book regarding war gaming at the US Naval War College, in 1946-47, with the Soviet Union as the 'enemy' would be equally enlightening; I was sadly disappointed.

This 450-plus-page tome, with the exception of the first and last chapters, literally 'bored me to tears'. If you want to know how to run a maritime war game down to the last minute decision, the last gallon of fuel, the last air sortie, the last shell fired and the last course alteration then this is your book,